

IN THE PUBLIC EYE

How the Church Is Handling Increased Global Visibility

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Michael Otterson, then managing director of the Public Affairs Department, at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, presented this essay at “In the Public Eye: How the Church Is Handling Increased Global Visibility,” the International Society’s twenty-third annual conference, April 2012, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

Forty-plus years ago, when I started work as a junior reporter on my first newspaper, a hard-bitten, tough news editor spelled out my job for me in stark terms. “Otterson,” she said, “if you can’t break down the entire story into a single short paragraph in your head, then you won’t be writing for newspapers.”

She was right, and it was good advice at the time. Fleet Street in London was then the hub of the larger British journalistic world I was entering, and some London tabloids had specific and tight limits on the length of a first paragraph. If memory serves, it was sixteen words for the mass-circulation *Daily Mirror*. And I learned to do it.

Now, decades later, the specifics of journalism styles and approaches have changed; however, for many in the news media, the core mentality has not. Much of TV and radio news, many newspapers, and what passes for news on the Internet is still about superficiality, overreporting

the irrelevant while simplifying to the point of banality, creating tension where there is none, meeting deadlines, beating the opposition by telling a story no one else has, and doing it all in ninety seconds or 350 words.

When we take this journalistic worldview and present it with as rich and complex a subject as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the media industry's instincts are to try to tell the story in sixteen words. That's pretty difficult when nine of those words are used up by the full name of the Church. Or to put it another way, a whole era of history is reduced to a single "Mormon Moment."

We all understand that the alliteration is irresistible, and the term "Mormon Moment" will continue to be used widely. I'd like to trace something of the history of this term and flesh it out with some additional dimension and perspective. Meanwhile, I congratulate the International Society for choosing the title it did—"In the Public Eye"—rather than the "Mormon Moment."

History has not recorded the name of the journalist who created the phrase "Mormon Moment," but the earliest reference I have found was a headline in *U.S. News and World Report* in November 2000. The story was about a new Mormon temple in Houston. The Church's growth, according to the story's author, was "a tangible sign of the rising fortunes of . . . the Salt Lake City-based Church."

Two years later, the media identified another "Mormon Moment" when the 2002 Winter Olympics arrived in Salt Lake City. That was an extraordinary period. Once again, label-prone journalists wanted to call them "The Mormon Games," but "Mormon Moment" was used again, too. In one three-week period in 2002, 1,300 journalists came through our public affairs facilities in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building.

Five more years and we entered the US presidential campaign season of 2007–8, with "Mormon Moment" rising in favor once again. And today, if you Google "Mormon Moment," you'll get some 175,000 hits.

Twelve years from the year 2000 to today is a long "moment." But since we are trying to get perspective, let's step back even further. Was the spring of 1820 in a secluded wood in upstate New York a "Mormon Moment"? Was the turbulent period of 1820 through 1844 a "moment," which saw the publication of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the priesthood, the initial rapid growth of the Church, the first missionary successes overseas,

the series of relocations from New York to Ohio to Missouri to Illinois? What about the epic journey under Brigham Young—the Mormon equivalent of the Jewish Exodus—and the difficult birth of Salt Lake City, including the tense period ten years later when federal troops arrived to quell the supposed Mormon rebellion? That surely was a “Mormon Moment.”

Then of course, there was that momentous Manifesto of 1890, officially ending polygamy, followed ten years later by the refusal of the US Senate to seat the senator from Utah, Reed Smoot—a “Mormon Moment” if ever there was one.

Then we entered a period of relatively quiet consolidation, and the Church emerged fifty years later without the great burden of financial debt and, surprisingly, with newfound respectability—a very significant fifty-year transitional “moment,” followed by an incredible growth surge that began in the sixties and has continued, essentially unabated.

In the 1970s, we saw the priesthood extended to men of all races, which set the stage for unprecedented growth in many parts of the world, not just Africa. The 1970s also saw the rise of organized opposition to the Church on a scale not seen since Joseph Smith’s day, mostly coming from fundamentalist Christian pastors. Books, movies, and tracts—everything is thrown at the Church. And we are now into living memory, and I don’t need to belabor the point.

Perhaps after 182 years of successive moments, it’s time to change the paradigm. Of course the “Mormon Moment” is going to live on in the journalistic lexicon, but let’s now try to examine where we are today, with the expectation that this is not a transitory moment that will end but simply the latest phase in the historic emergence of the Church to a higher level of public consciousness. I will do that by examining seven specific and enduring contributors to this higher Church profile, not necessarily in order of importance. The first is the emergence of Latter-day Saint celebrities.

CATEGORY 1: LDS CELEBRITIES

Of course, we all know a lot of the interest right now is being driven by the fact that one man is running for president of his country, and he’s a Latter-day Saint. We all know that, right? We don’t need to mention any

names? Just to make sure we all know the person we are talking about, let me show a picture [shows a picture of Yeah Samake].

You were expecting someone else, perhaps. For those who may not know, this is Yeah Samake, a BYU alumnus and a candidate for president of the African nation of Mali, one of the poorest countries in the world. At least, he was running for president until a military coup removed the incumbent president. Now the situation is unclear.

I show his picture to make my first important point as to what is driving public attention. It is not all about American presidential politics. One contributing factor to the rising profile of the Church is the emergence of individual Latter-day Saints as celebrities in different parts of the world.

This is not a new phenomenon, but it is accelerating. I remember in England in the 1970s the huge popularity of the Osmonds (who are still fondly remembered there by that generation) and also of people like golfers Billy Casper and Johnny Miller.

Today, Latter-day Saint celebrities are almost too numerous to mention. Many come from the world of sports. Others are in arts and entertainment. Some have made names for themselves in business and industry, others are emerging in academia, and several have been very successful in politics.

I've put up a slide of several faces; you will recognize most of them, and you may have a different visceral reaction to one or two simply because you may not necessarily identify with their politics or with some other aspects of their very public life. This, of course, is only a small sample of prominent Latter-day Saints.

Not all of these individuals have a measurable impact on the Church's reputation—at least not on a macro level—but some do because they make no secret of their faith. Collectively, they have the net effect of raising the Church's profile and adding to the national and international conversation about Mormons.

Purely from the Church's point of view, the most helpful voices are those who, in a very natural way and without being preachy, let people know they are Latter-day Saints. One of the best examples is Clayton Christensen, a Harvard business professor who has a world reputation as a pioneer in business innovation.

On his professional website, right under his biography, is a link, “Why I Belong and Why I Believe,” that eloquently explains his faith and membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When *Forbes* magazine recently wanted to do a cover story on Brother Christensen, he agreed only if he could talk about his religious faith, which is an integral part of who he is. The resultant article was extraordinary. In about six weeks, the *New Yorker* magazine will publish a major feature on Brother Christensen, including his faith, which will likely run up to ten pages. In May, he will publish a book based on an article already published, “How Will I Measure My Life.”

While Brother Christensen is a ready example, there are thousands of Latter-day Saints who have achieved respect and prominence in their own fields of endeavor who are raising the profile of the Church. It’s worth mentioning that none of these individuals is ever positioned by us as speaking for the Church. They speak for themselves, and they represent themselves as individual Latter-day Saints. Our membership is diverse. It has been described as a big tent—bigger than many people suppose. The Church does not, could not, and should not try to control those individual voices. All we can do is point out to the media that they speak as individuals and may or may not reflect official Church teachings or policy positions.

CATEGORY 2: LDS POLITICIANS

In some ways, this is a subcategory of the first, but because of its impact, it deserves to stand on its own. Latter-day Saints have been elected as senators, congressmen, and state governors for over a century, but none seemed to penetrate public consciousness in a major way until 2007, when a former governor announced his intention to run for president. In the current campaign of 2011–12, at one stage (until mid-January) two of the remaining five nominees were Latter-day Saints.

Unquestionably, this factor is driving much of the current media interest and has given rise to this sense that the “Mormon Moment” is temporary. Obviously, when the election is over—depending on the outcome—this element may fade rapidly. But it’s my central premise today, as I’ll show later, that the Church’s profile will remain high beyond the US presidential election.

The presidential campaign presents significant challenges and opportunities for the Church. The most obvious challenge is keeping the

institutional Church out of the political campaigning. This is wise for all kinds of reasons. The most compelling is simply that it is not part of the Church's mission to campaign for political candidates or influence.

The Lord states in the Doctrine and Covenants that the Church should stand independent. That suggests it must keep its distance from the mechanisms of party politics. "That through my providence, notwithstanding the tribulation which shall descend upon you, that the Church may stand independent above all other creatures beneath the celestial world" (D&C 78:14).

This does not prevent the Church from exercising its right to express its views to government on issues of the day that it feels have moral implications or that affect the Church and its members directly—Proposition 8 is an example—but that is very different from Church leaders engaging in party politics and election campaigns.

Moreover, Church leaders—the "Brethren" in our Latter-day Saint vernacular—are focused on preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world and strengthening members. That is their mission and their great preoccupation. Like some other members of the Public Affairs staff, I am privileged to have significant interaction with the Brethren, and I can personally attest to the fact I have never once heard a suggestion from any one of them that the Church institutionally should support a party candidate or campaign. It does not happen.

Another reason for avoiding party politics is equally obvious. We have a diverse membership, and since good principles are found in different political parties, our people are free to choose for themselves which political candidates to support or not support. The Church will not alienate a substantial portion of its members by supporting a candidate from one party and excluding another. And, of course, this applies in any country of the world.

This, I think, is one principle we have successfully conveyed to political journalists to the point of convincing them. From the very start, we proactively contacted and met with political journalists and emphasized Church policy by staying out of the campaign. In 2007 and 2008, two members of the Quorum of Twelve—Elder Ballard and Elder Cook, who then both had responsibility for Public Affairs—in company with Public Affairs staff, visited a string of editorial boards to help educate journalists. We acknowledged the

inevitability of the Church becoming a part of the conversation from time to time, and we invited them to contact us if they had questions about the Church. We told them we would not engage in conversations about individual candidates, discuss whether their positions on issues were in alignment with the Church, or comment on their individual Church activity. We have kept to that principle, and I think journalists have appreciated it.

It is not always easy to distance ourselves from politics when others are determined to drag us in. Some of you will have seen the following clip from CNN, but it's worth showing at least part of it because of the lessons it teaches. [Anderson Cooper video clip]

This came out of the blue at a rally for one of the nominees, and we had no way of avoiding it. Despite our neutrality, the name of the Church was dragged into a political rally by someone who has no such reservations about mixing his own faith with campaign politics. You can see how we dealt with it—we asserted our neutrality, we incorporated our key message about a Christ-centered church, and we had the anchor promote Mormon.org as a source for viewers. In addition, previous behind-the-scenes work with CNN helped inform Anderson Cooper's interview. If you have seen all of this interview, you'll know this wasn't a good day for the pastor. Over the next few days, many nationally prominent figures, including journalists, spoke out against the pastor for pulling religion into the campaign in such a crass way.

It will be very important for our members to understand this insistence on institutional neutrality. I am aware of occasional letters we receive at headquarters that contain "helpful suggestions" from members for particular candidates that the writers would like us to pass on. No doubt those will increase in volume as the season unfolds, but there will be no mail delivery via the Church. As a signal both to members and nonmembers, the Church has posted on its Newsroom website for several years its explicit political neutrality policies, and it is probably worth reading this section: "Elected officials who are Latter-day Saints make their own decisions and may not necessarily be in agreement with one another or even with a publicly stated Church position. While the Church may communicate its views to them, as it may to any other elected official, it recognizes that these officials still must make their own choices based on their best judgment and with consideration of the constituencies whom they were elected to represent."¹

CATEGORY 3: ACADEMICS

A third factor that is driving attention is the growing list of academics who are researching or writing about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I'm not talking about scholars of Church history who have been prominent in their own circles for years and who have added substantially to the amount of serious literature on the Church but instead a new generation of scholars who are being more and more frequently quoted in mainstream media—scholars such as sociologist David Campbell, coauthor of *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, an award-winning and truly groundbreaking work. Another is Matthew Bowman, a Mormon with a doctorate in American religious history from Georgetown, whose book *The Mormon People* may become a commonly used reference for journalists. Another to be published in the next few months by author J. B. Haws will be a history of Church public affairs, published by the Oxford University Press, the first such study I am aware of on this topic. While it is not my place to endorse any of these authors and what they write, it is beyond dispute that the serious work in which they and others are engaged is raising the Church's public profile in significant ways with thoughtful observers.

We are also seeing significant attention paid to the Church by non-Latter-day Saint scholars who have access to mainstream media. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life has invested its own resources and significant research relative to Latter-day Saint life and practice. That research has received heavy attention in the news media, especially here in the United States.

For ten years, a twice-yearly Faith Angle Forum has convened in Florida for a select group of nationally respected journalists and distinguished scholars. This in-depth discussion of some of the most crucial issues facing Americans today, now sponsored by the Ethics and Public Policy Center, has included Mormon-related topics in the last two such gatherings.

This past month, a trio of sociologists from the University of Pennsylvania and Indiana University–Purdue released a new study that captured how deeply committed Latter-day Saints are, not only to their own faith but to their wider community. According to this robust study of church-going Latter-day Saints, Mormons are the most “pro-social” members

of American society, giving far more in time and money to Church and secular causes than other Americans.

There are, of course, many other scholars, and this isn't intended as a complete list. These scholars are significant not only for the works they publish but also because they have become sources for journalists who are looking for comment. There is great value in independent, well-informed, and balanced commentary from respected scholars in such situations.

CATEGORY 4: LDS BLOGGERS

How much influence individual Latter-day Saint bloggers as a whole have on the public's perception of the Church is a matter of conjecture. The term "bloggers" covers a wide field. Frankly, the term "bloggernacle," which has been invented to describe the collection of blogs focused on Latter-day Saint themes, is an apt one. This is only a slice of the blogging world. For some members, these blogs provide an important and valued voice for discussion, but so far they operate under a kind of tabernacle-like dome under which contributions from bloggers echo to and from defined audiences. Only occasionally does something spill outside to non-Latter-day Saint mass media or even to the rank-and-file Church membership.

Other Latter-day Saint bloggers write outside the bloggernacle and don't limit their audiences to Church members. Recently, the Church's Research and Information Division, at our request, asked a sizeable sample of Latter-day Saint leaders and another sample of Latter-day Saint members in several parts of the United States about their familiarity with these bloggers who are sometimes quoted in mainstream media. From a sample of over four hundred bishops, no blogger in this category of what I might call "independent voices" registered awareness above 3 percent. Among members generally, it was even lower.

Some of these bloggers are obviously agenda driven. I do not say that disparagingly. They are what they are, and the Internet offers everyone a voice. I mention it only to note in passing, because some bloggers push themes that are very different from the official voice of the Church, and we sometimes have a challenge in explaining that to journalists.

Mormon blogger Jana Riess recently put it this way:

I think that anyone who speaks to the press about Mormonism should be aware of having an agenda and knowing what that agenda is. A few weeks ago, I was contacted by a national network news producer who was pulling together a story about Mormonism. She wanted to get me on camera to share my experiences as a Mormon feminist. I said I would be happy to help, but that the list of people she had talked to did not yet include enough conservative or traditional Latter-day Saints. For balance it would be important to include those voices too.

Everyone who has ever been involved in Mormonism . . . has some kind of Mormon story. In that sense they—we—can and should speak for Mormonism. We do not speak for the LDS Church, however, and we can't claim expert status merely on the basis of limited involvement and cursory knowledge of Mormonism. Reporters should try to achieve balance . . . and Mormon pundits should adopt measures of accountability.²

I congratulate Jana Riess on that kind of honesty and transparency, which takes some strength of character. She is absolutely right to remind a TV network that they have a responsibility to portray what she calls “traditional Latter-day Saints,” or what I call “the Mormon worldview.”

Some time ago, the website GetReligion.org, which specializes in monitoring media coverage of religion, cautioned readers of Mormon bloggers to look for official attribution and not just take the writer's word as “gospel.”

The website noted that “if people make claims about evolving Mormon doctrines, look for names, titles and clear statements of attribution.”³

All of these disparate voices have their right to expression, but as individuals, they do not speak for the Church and should be careful not to imply they do.

More significant collectively to the rising awareness of the Church may be the plethora of so-called “Mormon mommy bloggers” on the Internet. Mommy bloggers, for those who may not know, are the army of mostly stay-at-home mothers who also blog about their husbands, their kids, their lives, and their faith. In the interest of full disclosure here, I must admit to a bias—I have six daughters, all of whom blog, and a couple of them are outstanding writers and photographers. None of their blogs have large followings, but many Latter-day Saint blogs do, and they have

raised the Church's profile among a segment of the public that we would not have expected.

A little over a year ago, a very fine writer named Emily Matchar from North Carolina wrote an article called "Why I Can't Stop Reading Mormon Housewife Blogs." Describing herself as a secular, childless woman who has never baked a cupcake, Matchar acknowledges she and a number of her friends are drawn to these LDS women's blogs with a strange fascination. She asks herself why, and she answers her own question:

Well, to use a word that makes me cringe, these blogs are weirdly "uplifting." To read Mormon lifestyle blogs is to peer into a strange and fascinating world where the most fraught issues of modern living—marriage and child rearing—appear completely unproblematic. This seems practically subversive to someone like me, weaned on an endless media parade of fretful stories about "work-life balance" and soaring divorce rates and the perils of marrying too young/too old/too whatever. . . .

"It seems that a lot of popular culture wants to portray marriage and motherhood as demeaning, restrictive, or simple, but in the LDS Church, motherhood is a very important job, and it's treated with a lot of respect," says Natalie Holbrook, the New York-based author of the popular blog *Nat the Fat Rat*. "Most of my readers are non-LDS women in their late 20s and early 30s, college educated, many earning secondary degrees on the postgraduate level, and a comment I often get is, 'You are making me want kids, and I've never wanted kids!'"

Indeed, Mormon bloggers like Holbrook make marriage and motherhood seem, well, fun. Easy. Joyful. These women seem relaxed and untouched by cynicism. They throw elaborate astronaut-themed birthday parties for their kids and go on Sunday family drives to see the fall leaves change. . . . They often have close, large extended families; moms and sisters are always dropping in to watch the kids or help out with cake decorating. Their lives seem adorable and old-fashioned and comforting.

"I've gotten e-mails from readers thanking me for putting a positive spin on marriage and family," Holbrook says. "It's important to acknowledge the hard parts—and I think we all do—but why not focus more on

the lovely and the beautiful? That positive attitude is a very common theme throughout all aspects of the Mormon faith.”⁴

Maybe it’s something to do with our tradition of journal keeping, but thousands of Latter-day Saint women who are writing about familiar themes of home and family seem to have created a new media niche that is raising the Church’s profile in unexpected places.

CATEGORY 5: POPULAR CULTURE

Popular culture is an incredibly powerful force in conditioning public opinion and increasing awareness. It may be the factor over which we have the least influence, but it may be one of the most significant in terms of how many members of the general public see the Church.

As a defined community grows, its emergence into popular culture becomes inevitable. We should not underestimate the powerful, formative influence popular culture has in shaping and conditioning ordinary public opinion. Movies, plays, books, music lyrics, and even humor in conversation are all signs people are beginning to pay attention. As Catholics and Jews have known for centuries, popular culture includes parody and satire, and that can be uncomfortable for the target. By its nature, parody does not pretend to accurately portray the subject of its attention. How targeted communities respond to such portrayals is very important.

We don’t have to look far to see examples of Mormon-themed cultural expression. The best example of the powerful influence of popular culture over the past year is the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*. This is an irreverent and at times blasphemous production most Church members would be too uncomfortable to sit through. Nevertheless, it has been widely portrayed as being implicitly kind and positive to the Church, and in the end, it portrays missionaries as heroes.

How to respond to such a situation is challenging, because an attitude of defensiveness is likely to further alienate an already cynical public. It was for this reason that we phrased our response to the musical this way: “The production may attempt to entertain people for an evening, but the Book of Mormon as a volume of scripture will change people’s lives forever by bringing them closer to Christ.”⁵ Because it was not defensive, this statement was very widely reported, sucked the oxygen out of the potential for a story about conflict,

and lifted us above the fray onto higher ground. One of the show's producers praised the statement as "a perfect First Amendment-loving reaction."⁶

Humor and parody is especially difficult to deal with. Many of you will have seen various Mormon-related clips from the comedy show *The Colbert Report*. Stephen Colbert can be biting in his sarcasm and parody, but in one piece he portrayed Mormons as "irresistibly cool." Humor, I suggest, if not mean spirited, is generally best met with good grace or humor of our own.

Maintaining an appropriate institutional relationship with popular culture is challenging. For example, television shows like *Big Love* and *Sister Wives* feed polygamy themes and negative stereotypes into the public domain. In the interest of simple truth, we cannot let some things go unchallenged. We have pushed back hard and consistently, but, hopefully, always in a dignified way, both on misrepresentation and on insisting that journalists make distinctions between The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and polygamous groups. We have made significant progress over the past ten years, and we continue to do so, but polygamy remains one of the persistent associations with the Church in the public mind.

We can find evidence that Mormons have penetrated popular culture in the most unexpected places. Over the past few months, in addition to a lot of attention on the musical, the *New York Times* has run two articles on Mormons in popular culture. One of these was an introduction to the latest and hottest trends in young Mormon fashion. (Did you know there was something called Mormon fashion? And no, it's not what we wear at the Church Office Building.) The headline on this story is "To Be Young, Hip, and Mormon."

As if that wasn't enough, the other was an article about the venerable tradition of Mormon cuisine, with the image of a casserole dish of potatoes au gratin. The caption reads: "Updated Funeral Potatoes."

And before we leave popular culture as a factor in our rising visibility, we should note that over the past few years we have seen reality TV shows and competitions go out of their way to include Latter-day Saints in their casts. It is these kinds of shows that launched David Archuleta, Ken Jennings, and others. We confess ourselves to be bewildered by this trend.

CATEGORY 6: CHURCH INITIATIVES

Over the past year or so, American media interest in the Church has become intense. Every day, the Public Affairs Department scans the Internet and other sources for articles or broadcasts that mention the Church. I usually look at that report when I arrive at the office each morning. Sometimes such stories require a response, sometimes not. Often they represent interactions we have already had with journalists, and we are interested in seeing how their stories turned out.

Through the course of a typical day, our media staff engages dozens of times with media inquiries—sometimes up to fifty a day. Often we are responding, but often we are pushing an idea for a story we think will help people better understand the Church.

The industry term for all of this is “earned” media—it is publicity we don’t pay for, and it may be good or bad. In addition, the Church has its own way of elevating its public profile in positive ways that guarantees a more accurate portrayal. The Public Affairs Department is not responsible for paid advertising in the Church—that responsibility falls to the Missionary Department. I can’t claim any credit for the highly successful “I’m a Mormon” campaign that has been airing in many localities in the United States and a little outside of it. In our view, it is a superbly orchestrated campaign, allowing members of the Church to tell their own stories honestly and in unscripted ways.

The campaign is deliberately designed to break stereotypes, which it does by portraying a diverse membership. Each person has his or her own story, but all of them are united in a belief in the restored gospel. The nonmember audience gets a chance to meet real members, up close and personal. Each closes with an affirmation: “And I’m a Mormon.”

The spots invite viewers to Mormon.org, the primary Church website for curious nonmembers, where they will find thousands more members whom they can talk to if they wish.

Not unexpectedly, some news media outlets have tried to portray the stereotype-busting ads as a stealth campaign to support a presidential candidate—emphatically not true. You will know the Church has run TV, print, and radio ads for many years, and planning for this campaign began long

before the political season. In fact, the advertising schedule deliberately excluded primary states to avoid all appearance of having a political agenda.

We did frankly take advantage of *The Book of Mormon* musical running in New York. Since print ads seemed to be everywhere and taxis were driving about with “Book of Mormon” on their roofs, it made sense to accept that free advertising graciously and add New York to our own advertising schedule as well.

Our initiatives are not confined to the news media. The core purpose of our department is defined as “building bridges with opinion leaders to foster mutual understanding,” and that’s true whether or not particular opinion leaders agree with us. They are found in various endeavors—certainly the news media but also interfaith leaders, leaders of ethnic or cultural minorities, members of Congress, state governors, ambassadors, academics, think tanks, and those who represent advocacy groups. All of these groups have members who, from time to time, have interests that overlap with the Church, hence our interest in helping people better understand who we are and the values we represent.

It is very common for members of the Quorum of the Twelve to include visits to opinion leaders on occasions when they have other assignments, and there have been many mutually helpful conversations that have flowed from these engagements. It is all about increasing mutual trust, respect, and understanding.

CATEGORY 7: CHURCH GROWTH

In my view, the rising public awareness of Latter-day Saints in almost all of the categories I have covered today is a subset of one major factor, and that is the continued growth of the Church.

Without a rising membership that is felt in every field of endeavor, many of these other factors would be far less significant. Ever since their arrival in these valleys, the Saints have sent some of their members on missions around the world. What has happened in the last half of the twentieth century and the first dozen years of the twenty-first is something profoundly significant.

A map of membership distribution in the United States shows that while we have members in every state, there are large groups of Latter-day

Saints in the Intermountain West and in a corridor in the northeast, especially in and around Washington, DC. In addition, we have significant membership in Florida, Texas, California, the Chicago area, and in the northwest around Seattle and Portland. This is reflective of what we sometimes call the “Mormon Diaspora.” Families who move for work or BYU students who seek their careers away from Utah are helping fuel this.

In practical terms, although the center of gravity for Latter-day Saints is still clearly in the west of the country, our members everywhere are our best advertisement. They are schoolteachers and students, professional associates and fellow factory workers, bankers and businessmen, artists and musicians. All form a part of the rising tide of Church membership, with its potential for interaction with the nonmember public and for greater education as to our beliefs and practices.

Much of what we have discussed has been focused on the United States, but there are significant international implications for what is happening here that will be discussed by others. I might just mention that the profile of the Church in most countries of the world is greatly influenced by its reputation in the United States. In my three years in public affairs in England and twelve years in Australia, I found that to be overwhelmingly true, and every major story—especially controversies involving the Church in the US—spilled over to the local media, although usually abbreviated.

Nowhere has that been clearer than in the current presidential campaign. Who the president of the United States is matters to citizens of other countries, and so the media reports many of the aspects that are seen here.

As far as the Church is concerned, the French are calling it “the Mormon Wave.” Swedes and the British say Mormons are coming into “the mainstream.”

Some of the recent interest from media around the world includes magazines from Sweden, Finland, Russia, Brazil, and Slovenia, as well as a great deal of coverage in British media. In recent months, those we have engaged include the following:

Germany: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Der Spiegel*, *Rheinische Post*, *Die Welt*, and German Public Radio

UK: *Daily Mail*, *The Economist*, *The Guardian*, BBC, *The Times*, and Scottish newspapers

France: TV stations France 2, France 4, and France 24; *Le Monde* and other French papers (these frequently link to the Paris temple development)

Norway: newspapers

Denmark: TV

Switzerland: TV and public radio stations

Poland: TV

Korea: KBS television

Arabia: news agency Al Jazeera

Japan: broadcasting corporation NHK

Latin America: Brazilian newspapers and a national magazine; Telemundo, the Spanish-speaking TV network

International media: Reuters and the English-language *Voice of America*

To help cope with this international interest, we are in the process of launching some fifty international versions of our Newsroom website. A half dozen of these have been launched in the past few weeks, and more are going online every week. These sites will be helpful for local leaders and members to keep abreast of issues with which they may not be familiar.

It is much more than politics. It is much more than a moment. After 182 years, the Church may have reached the point that the Lord described in Doctrine and Covenants 1—finally, the Church has emerged “out of obscurity,” at least in some parts of the world.

At times during the current season, it seems like our challenge is no longer to bring the Church out of “obscurity and darkness” but to ensure the illumination it gets is truthful and fair. There are two kinds of obscurity: there is the kind that relates to invisibility and the kind that relates to misunderstanding. Joseph Smith said in his history that he endeavored to

“disabuse the public mind”⁷ of false ideas about himself and his work, and we are still working on that project. If phase 1 had to do with the Church’s visibility, then phase 2—which will be about achieving understanding—still mostly lies ahead.

The current period and the time ahead will be demanding of Church members. While there are opportunities for the general public to better understand the Church, it is obvious that dissenting voices and Church critics will seek to exploit this higher profile for their own objectives. Because we understand the principle of opposition in all things, and because we see precisely this kind of pushback whenever prophets have preached the gospel through the ages, we know there will be times when we will need thick skin. We may also need a sense of humor. Above all, we will need a spirit of kindness and forgiveness, remembering that our claim to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ is most convincing when our actions are in harmony with our beliefs.

NOTES

1. “Political Neutrality,” <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/official-statement/political-neutrality>.
2. Jana Riess, “Who Speaks for Mormonism?,” *Religion News Service*, 26 March 2012.
3. Terry Mattingly, “LDS ‘Evolving’ on Sexuality? Says Who?,” *Get Religion* (blog), 2 September 2011.
4. Emily Matchar, “Why I Can’t Stop Reading Mormon Housewife Blogs,” *Salon*, 15 January 2011.
5. Lyman Kirkland, “*Book of Mormon* Musical: Church’s Official Statement,” 7 February 2011.
6. Andrew Goldman, “The Fogies of ‘South Park,’” *New York Times Magazine*, 23 September 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/25/magazine/talk-trey-parker-and-matt-stone-of-south-park.html>.
7. Joseph Smith—History 1:1.